

IN THE CLAIMS:

Claim 1 (withdrawn): A unit for handling at least one product comprising at least one ream of sheets, the unit being characterized by comprising at least two gripping members ; and actuating means for moving the gripping members to and from a gripping position wherein the gripping members engage the product on opposite sides of the product in a given first direction.

Claim 2 (withdrawn): A unit as claimed in Claim 1, wherein each gripping member comprised two substantially parallel jaws; said actuating mean comprising first actuating means for moving the jaws to and from a gripping position wherein the jaws engage the product on opposite sides of the product in a second direction substantially crosswise to said first direction.

Claim 3 (withdrawn): A unit as claimed in Claim 2, wherein said ream comprises a number of sheets superimposed in said second direction.

Claim 4 (withdrawn): A unit as claimed in Claim 1, wherein each gripping member comprises stop means defining a substantially flat surface for engaging, in use, said product; said actuating means comprising second actuating means designed to move the gripping members in said first direction so that said surface is perpendicular at all times to the first direction as the gripping members move in the first direction.

Claim 5 (withdrawn): A unit as claimed in Claim 1, wherein said actuating means comprise, for each said gripping member, two actuating devices, each of which in turn

comprises a guide, a slide mounted to slide along said guide, and a crank mechanism; said gripping member being connected to said crank mechanisms to move linearly in said first direction as said slides move along the relative said guides.

Claim 6 (withdrawn): A unit as claimed in Claim 5, wherein the actuating devices of each gripping member are interconnected and timed with each other and with the actuating devices of the other gripping member so as to move the gripping members simultaneously with respect to each other in said first direction .

Claim 7 (withdrawn): A unit as claimed in Claim 5, wherein each said crank mechanism comprises a crank oscillating about a first axis, and a connecting rod oscillating about a second, a third, and a fourth axis all substantially parallel to said first axis; said second, said third, and said fourth axis being hinge axes by which the connecting rod oscillates with respect to the crank, the slide, and the relative gripping member respectively.

Claim 8 (withdrawn): A unit as claimed in Claim 7, wherein the crank and the connecting rod are designed so that the relative said first and said fourth axis remain aligned with each other in said first direction as the relative gripping member moves in the first direction.

Claim 9 (withdrawn): A unit as claimed in Claim 7, wherein said second axis is substantially equidistant from each of said first, said third, and said fourth axis.

Claim 10 (withdrawn): A unit as claimed in Claim 7, wherein said first and said third axis of each crank mechanism are aligned with each other in a third direction substantially crosswise to said first direction, and are aligned with the first and the third axis of the other crank mechanism in the third direction.

Claim 11 (withdrawn): A unit as claimed in Claim 1, wherein the product is substantially parallelepiped-shaped and defined by four faces parallel to said first direction; said gripping members being designed to leave at least three of said four faces free in said gripping position.

Claim 12 (withdrawn): A unit as claimed in Claim 1, wherein said actuating means comprise third actuating means for moving said gripping members with respect to each other in said first direction.

Claim 13 (withdrawn): A unit as claimed in Claim 1, wherein said actuating means comprise fourth actuating means for moving a first of said gripping members, about a fifth axis of rotation substantially parallel to said first direction, to and from a loading position wherein said first gripping member substantially faces a second of said gripping members.

Claim 14 (withdrawn): A unit as claimed in Claim 1, wherein a first of said gripping members is movable, in a fourth direction substantially crosswise to said first direction, to and from a loading position wherein said first gripping member substantially faces a second of said gripping members.

Claim 15 (withdrawn): A unit as claimed in Claim 13, wherein said first gripping member, when in the loading position, is located beneath said second gripping member.

Claim 16 (withdrawn): A unit as claimed in Claim 1, wherein at least one of the gripping members has suction means for engaging said product.

Claim 17 (withdrawn): A unit as claimed in Claim 1, wherein said ream comprises a number of sheets superimposed in said first direction.

Claim 18 (new): A unit for handling at least one product comprising at least one ream of sheets, the product being substantially parallelepiped-shaped and being defined by two parallel, respectively top and bottom, horizontal faces, the unit comprising at least one gripping device comprising two parallel, respectively top and bottom jaws parallel to said top and bottom faces, first actuating means for moving the jaws to and from a gripping position wherein the jaws engage the product on said top and bottom faces, and second actuating means for moving the bottom jaw between a loading position wherein the bottom jaw is located beneath the top jaw and an unloading position wherein the bottom jaw is located laterally with respect to the top jaw in order to free the bottom face of the product.

Claim 19 (new): A unit as claimed in Claim 18, wherein said top and bottom jaws are movable with respect to each other to and from said gripping position in a direction perpendicular to said top and bottom faces.

Claim 20 (new): A unit as claimed in Claim 18, wherein said bottom jaw is movable between said loading and unloading positions about an axis of rotation substantially parallel to a direction perpendicular to said top and bottom faces.

Claim 21 (new): A unit as claimed in Claim 18, wherein said bottom jaw is movable between said loading and unloading positions in a direction substantially parallel to said top and bottom faces.

Claim 22 (new): A unit as claimed in Claim 18, wherein said top jaw has suction means for engaging said product and for retaining the product as the bottom jaw moves in said unloading position.

Claim 23 (new): A unit as claimed in Claim 18, wherein the product is further defined by four vertical lateral faces perpendicular to said top and bottom faces; said gripping device further comprising a stop member defined by a substantially flat surface perpendicular to said top and bottom jaws for engaging, in use, one of said lateral faces.